

First war death was from Motueka

At the Anzac Day parade in Motueka yesterday, a big parade of men was evidence of the readiness of men of the Motueka district to respond to the call for arms in the two world wars. A little-known fact is that the first New Zealand soldier killed in the First World War came from the Motueka district. His name was William Arthur Ham, and he came from Ngatimoti, but beyond that little appears known of him.

At the outbreak of war in 1914 men from Nelson were quick to volunteer, a fact acknowledged in a patriotic booklet published by the Mail in 1916.

"In the city, the towns and the country of Nelson province, the same spirit of working patriotism has been shown during the past two years and by present signs it will be the same till the world's enemy has been vanquished," it said. "No problem of recruiting has caused anxiety in and around Nelson City, or the districts of Motueka, Takaka, Waimea, Collingwood, Stanley Brook and others whose sons embark at the ports of Motueka."

The Prime Minister of the time, William Massey noted that the response of Nelson's men "has been worthy of the district's name, worthy of the brave pioneers of Tasman Bay, worthy of the British Empire. The test of war has amply proved that the sunny plains and sheltered vales of Nelson have nurtured a loyal and hardy race of men who today are as ready and eager as were their forbears to go forth in defence of liberty and justice..."

A photo of troops departing from the old wharf at Motueka shows a mixture of uniforms and civilian dress among the volunteers. One dressed in three-piece suit, tie and hat has webbing belts, and ammunition pouches, and a rifle in his Australian-style slouch hats, or like Private Ham, peaked caps.

Private Ham was among men of the first New Zealand expeditionary force, who left Wellington Harbour in 10 transport ships on October 16, 1914 bound for Britain. Another aboard the flotilla was the notable soldier and author from Motueka district,

Historic Motueka... with Fergus Holyoake



Major C. B. Brereton, also of Ngatimoti. He described his war experiences in a book "Tales of Three Campaigns", and this is the most comprehensive account available here of the Battle of Suez canal in which Private Ham died.

One unusual feature of the expeditionary force was that it was escorted by a Japanese cruiser, the Ibuki. The Japanese sailors saluted the departing New Zealand ships with a resounding "Banzai" cheer.

The Japanese suffered two indignities on the voyage to Egypt. As the flotilla entered the port of Aden, the soldiers manning a fort at the port entrance fired a warning shot across the bows of the Ibuki. They later had to send an apology to the Japanese, who were offended by their reception.

The following day in port a New Zealand soldier emptied a basket of potato peelings over the side of one of the transport ships and managed to pour them all over one of the Japanese officers who was coming alongside in a boat to make an official call. To the Japanese, concerned about "keeping face", this was considered a gross insult.

The first death in the expeditionary force was not a war casualty. During the celebrations that were then fashionable for crossing the equator one of the expedition's medical officers attempted to dive into a bath which was being used to dunk those on their first crossing. He missed the bath, struck

the deck and broke his neck. He died at Colombo.

After Turkey entered the war, the convoy was diverted to Egypt where the troops disembarked at Alexandria and trained before being deployed at Ismailia on the Suez canal in mid-January 1915.

On the morning of February 3, 1915, the force came under machine-gun fire from Turkish troops on the other side of the canal. The Turks then began a crossing of the canal using steel pontoons, with troops crossing at three points, each about a kilometre apart. Several hundred managed to get across the canal and to establish positions, but they were beaten back or killed by New Zealand, Indian and Gurkha soldiers who were defending on the Egyptian side.

Private Ham died in a fluke accident. An empty bullet struck the wood of his rifle and ricocheted off into his neck, breaking his spinal column. He died in Ismailia Hospital on the evening of February 5, 1915.

He was buried at the civil cemetery at Ismailia where Major Brereton said a "great yawning hole of 100 yards long, eight feet wide and eight feet deep had been foolishly dug there to receive our dead after the battle. But we did not bury him in it, and it was filled up again unused. It must have been designed by a pessimist and was anything but reassuring for the troops to see before the battle".

The Turks retreated and the main credit among the New Zealand force went to the 12th Nelson Company of the Canterbury Battalion who had helped fill a gap between themselves and Indian troops to the north and had repulsed the attack. Artillery and naval craft joined in, the Indians' counter-attacked killing hundreds of Turks.

The New Zealand force, later combined with Australian soldiers, known as the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) were to go on to another battle with the Turks, the disastrous landing at Gallipoli.

The total New Zealand casualties from the Battle of the Suez Canal were one dead and one wounded. One of the Turkish pontoons in the attack was brought back to Nelson and for many years was displayed in Queens Gardens in Nelson.

At Ngatimoti in front of the Anglican Church a memorial was erected to Private Ham and other men from Ngatimoti who died in World War I. In the 1929 earthquake the spire of the memorial cracked badly. It was repaired and now carries an inscription.



Major Brereton.



The first volunteers depart from Motueka. William Ham is on the right.



William Arthur Ham.



The Ngatimoti memorial before the Murchison earthquake.